

# Writing for *International Security*

## A Contributors' Guide

Teresa Pelton  
Johnson

[a.k.a. Teresa J. Lawson]

The editors of *International Security* are often asked what we seek in an article. In the process of editing the journal, we also give a lot of advice on organizing and presenting an argument for publication. We decided to publish this guide for potential contributors to share "behind-the-scenes" thinking about how an article is selected and prepared for publication.

This is not a set of rules, but advice (some of it quite basic). It covers suggestions for solving some of the most common difficulties we see in many of the hundreds of manuscripts submitted every year. We hope that these reminders will be useful to potential contributors.<sup>1</sup>

The guide begins with a review of the standards for selection of articles for publication. This is followed by advice on how to organize an argument; how to write and revise for maximum effect; and using and sharing criticism.

---

*As Assistant Managing Editor, Teresa Pelton Johnson has edited the contents of International Security since 1987, as well as a variety of books and other publications. Before she became an editor, she practiced law in Washington state for eight years.*

---

Any time an author tries to thank an editor of this journal in an acknowledgement like this one, we delete it, because authors do not owe us any special thanks for doing our jobs. However, if I had been permitted to thank *IS* editors, I would have expressed my gratitude to three Managing Editors who have made this journal what it is, and who have taught me so much: Steven E. Miller, Stephen Van Evera, and Sean M. Lynn-Jones. Miriam Avins, Michael Desch, Ted Hopf, Chaim Kaufmann, John Mearsheimer, Jack Snyder, Mark Stoler, and Stephen Walt have also given me good advice on this guide and earlier versions that I developed to use in workshops for potential journal contributors.

---

1. Authors who want their articles considered for publication should send us three copies of their articles, with the notes as well as text double-spaced. Notes should follow the journal's standard format, which is explained (along with other details of submission and publication) in the journal's stylesheet. Like most journals, *International Security* will send you a copy of the stylesheet (call us at [617] 495-1914); you can also figure out how to submit and what format is preferred by examining a recent copy of the journal.

Submissions go through an anonymous review process; this usually takes two to three months, sometimes more if we request a revision. The process of editing and final revision of articles selected for publication is often concentrated in days or weeks. It takes a little over three months after a final edited manuscript goes to press until the new issue appears.

---

*International Security*, Fall 1991 (Vol. 16, No. 2)  
© 1991 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College and of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

### *What Should an International Security Article Look Like?*

The editors and reviewers evaluate manuscripts on the basis of four primary criteria: subject, policy-relevance, observance of scholarly standards of evidence and argumentation, and readability.

The editors define the subject of international security broadly to cover all matters pertinent to the use, threat, and control of force. These include examinations of current policy choices;<sup>2</sup> analyses of theoretical issues<sup>3</sup> and of technical issues<sup>4</sup> of importance to current policy questions; and historical articles that present arguments and discoveries of relevance to current policy questions.<sup>5</sup> Very few submissions are rejected solely on the grounds that they lie beyond the journal's purview.

More frequently, manuscripts fail to clear the "so what?" hurdle. Even if everything in the article is true, does it teach us something important? The editors look for articles that frame or solve at least part of an important puzzle. An article that hides in "the trivial, the formal, the methodological, the purely theoretical, the remotely historical—in short, the politically irrelevant" is not likely to make it into the journal's pages.<sup>6</sup>

A third concern is that articles should observe the norms of argument and evidence that permit knowledge to accumulate.<sup>7</sup> The arguments and their

---

2. For example, Michael E. Brown, "The U.S. Manned Bomber and Strategic Deterrence in the 1990s," *International Security*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (Fall 1989), pp. 4–46; Donald Rice, "The Manned Bomber and Strategic Deterrence: The U.S. Air Force Perspective," *International Security*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (Summer 1990), pp. 100–128; and Brown, "The Case Against the B-2," *ibid.*, pp. 129–153.

3. See, for example, Stephen Peter Rosen, "New Ways of War: Understanding Military Innovation," *International Security*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (Summer 1988), pp. 134–168; Stephen M. Walt, "Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power," *International Security*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (Spring 1985), pp. 3–43.

4. E.g., Barbara G. Levi, Frank N. von Hippel, and William Daugherty, "Civilian Casualties from 'Limited' Nuclear Attacks on the Soviet Union," *International Security*, Vol. 12, No. 3 (Winter 1987/88), pp. 168–189; Donald MacKenzie, "The Soviet Union and Strategic Missile Guidance," *International Security*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (Fall 1988), pp. 5–54.

5. Historical articles in our pages have included: Holger Herwig, "Clio Deceived: Patriotic Self-Censorship in Germany After the Great War," *International Security*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (Fall 1987), pp. 5–45; David Alan Rosenberg, "The Origins of Overkill: Nuclear Weapons and American Strategy, 1945–1960," *International Security*, Vol. 7, No. 4 (Spring 1983), pp. 3–71.

6. Quotation from Hans J. Morgenthau, "The Purpose of Political Science," in James C. Charlesworth, ed., *A Design for Political Science: Scope, Objectives, and Methods* (Philadelphia: American Academy of Political and Social Science, 1966), p. 73.

7. A surprising number of submissions to *International Security*, perhaps because of the journal's policy orientation, lean toward the polemical rather than the well-argued. Potential contributors will know how standards for evidence and argument are applied in their particular fields, but it may nevertheless be helpful to contemplate how others have thought about method. A sample

limits and conditions should be stated clearly, so that there is no confusion about what is and is not argued. Statements of fact should be properly documented. Tests and evidence should be explained fully, so that the reader can assess whether they have been selected and used appropriately and fairly. Legitimate counter-arguments should be acknowledged and addressed. The article should summarize the debate of which it is part, and should specify what previous literature it confirms or revises. Articles that follow these standards will "contribute to the disciplined discourse that distinguishes a profession," an aspiration for the journal expressed in its first issue.<sup>8</sup>

While the journal's main audience comprises professional scholars, analysts, and policymakers, it should also reach beyond specialists to journalists, students in college courses, and the broader public.<sup>9</sup> We aim, therefore, to make all writing in the journal's pages easy to comprehend. An article should explain enough relevant historical, technical, and theoretical background, and it should be so well organized and clearly presented, that a literate college undergraduate can easily grasp the significant points in one reading.

*International Security* has no "editorial line," but instead seeks to air views from all parts of the political spectrum, in the belief that scholarly and policy

---

of such work includes: Alexander L. George, "Case Studies and Theory Development: The Method of Structured, Focused Comparison," in Paul G. Lauren, ed., *Diplomacy* (New York: Free Press, 1979), pp. 43–68; Alexander L. George and Timothy J. McKeown, "Case Studies and Theories of Organizational Decision Making," in *Advances in Information Processing in Organizations*, Vol. 2 (Greenwich, Conn.: JAI Press, 1985), pp. 21–58; Karl Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (New York: Basic Books, 1959); Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970); Imre Lakatos, "Falsification and the Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes," in Imre Lakatos and Alan Musgrave, eds., *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1970), pp. 91–196; Ernst Nagel, *The Structure of Science* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1961), esp. chaps. 1, 2, 13; Theda Skocpol and Margaret Sommers, "The Uses of Comparative History in Macrosocial Inquiry," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (April 1980), pp. 174–197; Jack Snyder, "Richness, Rigor, and Relevance in the Study of Soviet Foreign Policy," *International Security*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (Winter 1984/85), pp. 89–108; Arthur L. Stinchcombe, *Constructing Social Theories* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1983), pp. 1–17.

8. The editors, "Foreword," *International Security*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Summer 1976), p. 2.

9. At *IS*, we work with authors to publicize articles broadly: we issue a press release about each issue to several hundred journalists, and we encourage authors to write op eds based on their articles. Op eds provide an excellent forum for influencing public debate and policy-making, as well as garnering attention for the article in which the full argument is explicated. Op ed page editors are looking for a view that is contrary to the conventional wisdom on an issue they haven't covered, not another "on the one hand, on the other hand" piece. An op ed is just big enough (2–3 double-spaced pages) for a single forceful idea that the author, and the reader, can summarize in a sentence. In response to a phone call, newspapers will divulge their guidelines for submission.

discussion are best advanced by an open and vigorous debate. All viewpoints are welcome as long as they are clearly argued and well-supported. Indeed, the editors welcome manuscripts that make unorthodox arguments, because there is more to be learned from a new debate than from going over familiar ground.

### *Getting the Argument Across*

As editors, like any other readers, we are grateful for a well-written article that makes it easy to grasp and evaluate the substantive content. It is our experience, alas, that not all articles arriving on our doorstep meet that standard.<sup>10</sup> The advice that follows reflects the patterns of difficulties we see in many of the manuscripts submitted to *International Security*.

Articles should present ideas in a progression that will be logical and clear to the reader, not just to the author and his or her specialist colleagues. The more complex the ideas, the more important it is that they are presented to the reader in a form that is “user-friendly.”

The simplest, most telling order for presentation can be discovered by outlining the main and the subsidiary points and conditions of the argument, by making an arrow diagram of the argument, or by writing a summary introduction (see below). These steps should reveal whether all of the links in the chain are there, and can be arranged in a sensible order. I have often prepared an outline or a summary introduction of an article in order to discover what questions the author did not answer clearly in the manuscript, and how the material could be rearranged for greater clarity and less repetition. It can be useful to repeat this process with successive revisions, until the logic of the argument is as clear and clean as possible, and the logic is reflected in the architecture of the article. (See Figures 1 and 2.)

### *Writing and Revising*

Not every potential contributor to the journal devotes as much attention to presentation as to research and analysis. But if the article is already in good

---

10. The field of security studies, while not alone in suffering this ailment, has been afflicted with a “literary style [that] is often atrocious. . . . The uninitiated has to work his way through a forbidding miasma of acronyms and jargon.” Lawrence Freedman, *The Evolution of Nuclear Strategy*, second ed. (New York: St. Martins, 1989), p. xix.

Figure 1. The arrow diagram.

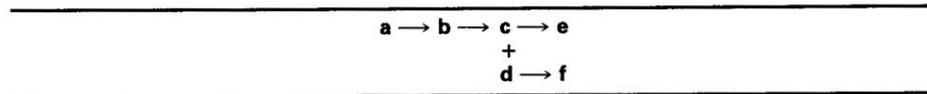


Figure 2. Presenting the chain of logic.

If you wanted to explain why sometimes “e” happens and why sometimes “f” happens instead, you started with dependent variables “e” and “f” and figured things out all the way back to “a,” including various conditions:

f is caused by c, if d is present, but if d is not present, then f doesn’t happen but e does, which is caused by c, and in either case c is caused by b, which is caused by a.

This makes the reader work too hard to absorb its meaning. In contrast, consider the relative simplicity of this way of stating the same causal chain:

a causes b, b causes c, c without d causes e, and c with d causes f.

Another way to describe the latter statement is that it moves from more remote to more specific causes (grammatically, it is active voice, rather than passive voice). It is easier to arrow-diagram, and easier for the reader to understand without confusion or undue effort.

---

shape, editors can do a lot more to help the author make the article truly excellent. Toward that end, I offer some of the suggestions that many of the journal’s authors have found useful.

#### WHY AM I READING THIS ARTICLE?

We encourage authors to begin each article with a summary introduction, of a few paragraphs or pages, that gives the reader an outline of the argument. (If the argument is complex, a summary introduction is particularly valuable.)

The summary introduction should answer the following questions:

- What question or questions does this article address?
- Why do these questions arise? What scholarly debate or current events set the context for the article?
- What answer or answers does the article offer?
- Why do these answers matter? How do they affect the debate from which they arise?
- What competing arguments or explanations does this article refute?
- How are the answers reached? Say a few words about methodology.
- How is this article organized? A “roadmap” paragraph should explain the structure of the sections that follow.

All seven elements may not be essential or appropriate for every article, but the question, the context, the answer, and the roadmap should always be up front.

Material in the summary introduction of many *International Security* articles began its life as material written at the end of an earlier draft. During the process of writing, authors often refine the argument and write excellent summaries in the conclusion. If we then promote this material to the front, it does the reader more good.

The conclusion might restate the main points of the argument, and may be the appropriate place (rather than the summary introduction) to explain the implications of the research for current debates. A conclusion can also indicate areas that, in light of this work, are now ripe for further research. If the summary introduction was complete, the conclusion might be quite short.

#### THE BODY OF THE ARTICLE

Many of the manuscripts we see are longer than necessary. They contain sections that are there only, it seems, because the author did the research, not because they are necessary to the logic of the argument. We encourage authors to trim away material that does not fit the outline or the arrow diagram, in order to avoid distracting or confusing readers with extraneous material. Every section, paragraph, and sentence should be there only if it advances the argument. Many authors, having gone through the painful process of severe pruning, have declared the improvements to be well worth the trouble.

Like the article itself, each section should have an internal logic. One format that may be useful is to: (1) state the argument; (2) follow it with the sup-

porting evidence; then (3) state the counter-arguments, qualifications, and limits of the argument; and (4) end with a transition statement, summing up the argument so far, perhaps noting implications, and pointing the reader in the right direction for the next section or paragraph.<sup>11</sup> Systematically using this or another model (perhaps gleaned from writing guides or from another writer's work) can make it easier to craft streamlined, yet comprehensive, outlines and first drafts.

Each paragraph should be organized around a main point that is stated at the beginning. A reader can then get a good idea of the substance of the article by reading the first sentence of each paragraph. Paragraphs, too, can be organized in the format suggested for sections.

**"HARD WRITING, EASY READING"**

It is more efficient if the author works hard on behalf of the reader, rather than the other way around (the ratio of authors to readers being what it is). I frequently encourage authors to explain more, rather than less, to define special terms and give background history, and to give examples, because few readers fully share the author's familiarity with essential facts and ideas. If there is too much explanation in a draft, it can be trimmed later.

Many manuscripts that we see are not very explicit about their arguments and conclusions, and thus run the risk that readers will not be able to discern the author's main points. Readers are often confused when authors are not careful to make it clear why each statement is there: is it a description of the arguments of others with which the author agrees, or those with which the author disagrees? Are these the author's own claims, or non-controversial background facts? Note where readers might go astray, and shape your language with precision to keep them on track.

**MAKE EVERY ELEMENT DO EXTRA WORK**

Use every opportunity to focus the reader's attention on the significant elements of your story. The title can restate the central point. Headings need not be mere labels ("Background" or "Conclusion"), but instead could be descriptive or prescriptive ("Saddam's Strategy Was Bound to Fail"; "Congress Should Cancel the Boomerang Program").

---

11. For a good example of a highly theoretical work that is nevertheless easy to read and understand, in part because the author is generous with intermediate summaries of the argument, see Robert Axelrod, *The Evolution of Cooperation* (New York: Basic Books, 1984).

Alternatives to text, such as graphs, pictures, tables, and charts, can sometimes serve better than text for presenting some kinds of information.<sup>12</sup> Sometimes it is useful to include in tables or charts the whole data set that the author collected (rather than just the few points that are pertinent to the argument), so that readers can extract other information and relationships.

Bibliographic footnotes that summarize the relevant literature are especially encouraged in *International Security* articles. They can tell the curious reader where to go for more, and which works are good, which are poor, which take one side in a controversy and which another. A few words of evaluation from the author can spare another researcher many hours of work. Notes need not be limited to citations and bibliographies; they can also state tangential points or minor arguments.

A final step in revising and editing is to try to strip out all unnecessary words and phrases; every word should count.

### *Using and Sharing Criticism*

Be aggressive in seeking out and identifying problems that should be fixed before the article goes public. Friendly critics can help an author anticipate attacks in order to preempt them and “bullet-proof” the article.

The quality of the manuscripts we see would undoubtedly be improved if more authors formed cooperative relationships with their colleagues to vet one another’s drafts. Both colleagues and non-specialists (your husband, your mother, your chess partner) can give useful advice before an article is submitted for formal consideration. Does the innocent but curious stranger who is your potential reader have any hope of understanding your article in one reading?

In reacting to comments, it is a mistake to assume that a reader’s confusion is due to stupidity or ignorance. Instead, seek out the reasons behind con-

---

12. Figures, tables, arrow diagrams, and charts can help readers see relationships of many kinds besides numerical ones. For recent examples, see: John W. Lewis, Hua Di, and Xue Litai, “Beijing’s Defense Establishment: Solving the Arms-Export Enigma,” *International Security*, Vol. 15, No. 4 (Spring 1991), p. 89; Figure 1 depicts the relationships of various players, governmental and otherwise, in the Chinese arms-export business; and Stephen M. Walt, “The Case for Finite Containment: Analyzing U.S. Grand Strategy,” *International Security*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (Summer 1989), p. 41; Table 1 categorizes six alternative U.S. grand strategies, their significant characteristics, and principal proponents.

fusion, and try to contend with each criticism or suggestion. If you choose not to follow advice, be able to articulate why.

When someone has agreed to give you several hours of time to comment on an article, it is not a good idea to hand over a manuscript that is hard to read, with faint print, careless typing and spelling, or single-spaced type with no margins for comments. The word "draft" should mean "as good as I can make it." Fix what you already know how to fix, so that the advice of colleagues, journal editors, or reviewers can make the article even better than you could alone. (This point might seem too obvious to state if we did not so often have evidence to the contrary in our mailbox.)

#### WORKING WITH EDITORS

Even a submission that the author considers finished and polished may go through another revision after it has been accepted for publication. The editors' interest is to make each article and each author look as good as possible, so we may recommend changes. You should always expect your editors (here or elsewhere) to have reasons for their suggestions, and you should feel free to debate those suggestions and reasons.<sup>13</sup> It is your name that goes on the article; subject to the journal's basic standards for format and for courteous and honest discourse, you have the final responsibility for content and presentation (and, of course, for errors).

#### *You, Too, Can Write for Publication*

There is nothing magic about making your writing better; it is not necessary to wait for an editor's intervention. Other articles that you find well-written may provide useful templates. Many good writers make a habit of thumbing through a writing guide once in a while for guidance, reminders, and inspiration.<sup>14</sup> And practice helps.

---

13. For an airing of common complaints about editors and a philosophy for dealing with them, see N. David Mermin, "What's Wrong with this Prose?" *Physics Today*, May 1989, p. 9.

14. Among my current favorite writing guides are William Strunk, Jr., and E.B. White, *The Elements of Style*, third ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1979) (time-tested, sensible, brief); and Joseph Williams, *Style: Toward Clarity and Grace* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990) (illuminating about how the English language works, and how to make it work better). For guidance on formats and the publication process overall, we rely on *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 13th ed., rev. and exp. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

Accurate, usable and hilarious references on grammar and punctuation, respectively, are Karen Elizabeth Gordon, *The Transitive Vampire: A Grammar Handbook for the Innocent, the Eager, and the Doomed* (New York: Times Books, 1984); and Gordon, *The Well-Tempered Sentence: A*

*Punctuation Handbook for the Innocent, the Eager, and the Doomed* (New York: Ticknor and Fields, 1983).

Or try one of the following, or their neighbors in the library stacks or on the bookstore shelves: Jacques Barzun, *Simple and Direct: A Rhetoric for Writers* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975); Peter Elbow, *Writing with Power: Techniques for Mastering the Writing Process* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981); V.A. Howard and J.H. Barton, *Thinking on Paper* (New York: Morrow, 1986); Kate L. Turabian, *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*, 5th ed., rev. and exp. by Bonnie Birtwhistle Honigsblum (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); William Zinsser, *On Writing Well: An Informal Guide to Writing Nonfiction*, 3rd ed., rev. and enl. (New York: Harper and Row, 1985).